

Commission Statement on Prevention

(Joined by Commissioners Bennett, Carvalho, Gallagher, Ryan, Brownsberger, Brodeur, Kinscherff, Knight, Guidry, Levy, Connolly, Kennedy, Hayden)

In the interest of ensuring public safety and reducing sexual violence, Massachusetts has invested valuable resources in implementing sex offender crime control strategies that focus on monitoring and controlling identified sex offenders. The Commission recognizes that the Massachusetts Probation Service, parole officers, and the law enforcement community share a collective mission of reducing sexual violence in Massachusetts through their work in prevention.

The Commission focused some of its attention on primary prevention as a tool to achieve its ultimate goal of reducing sexual violence in the Commonwealth. Primary prevention focuses on preventing first-time perpetration of sexual violence. This concept is part of what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers a comprehensive approach that includes interventions before violence has occurred (primary prevention), as well as the immediate response to violence (secondary prevention), and the long-term and systemic responses (tertiary prevention) to violence.

Primary prevention offers the best hope and the best investment for reducing the overall problem of sexual violence. By focusing on secondary and tertiary prevention, however, Massachusetts has invested nearly all of its resources and legislation at stopping repeat offenders – people who have been reported, arrested, and successfully prosecuted. Research has shown that only 32% of sexual assaults are ever reported (National Crime Victimization Survey, 2008-2012) and only 22% of those reports lead to an arrest (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Arrest Data, 2006-2010). Of those prosecuted, half are convicted.¹ Although these numbers are estimates, they do reveal that only a small fraction of actual offenders are targeted by current sex offender management practices such as registration, notification, and civil commitment.

A seminal study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention² has corroborated the hypothesis that children who have experienced various adverse conditions in their childhood and youth, including sexual abuse, are at higher risk when they become older to engage in high-risk health behaviors (e.g. substance abuse, over-eating, smoking, to cope with the trauma of their abuse). These behaviors, in turn, may lead to the most frequent and costly causes of disease and death in the U.S. In addition to health and mental health costs, our courts, law enforcement, child protection agencies, and prisons spend hundreds of millions each year dealing with the *aftermath* of child sexual abuse. **A strong investment in prevention holds the best promise of ending the epidemic and reducing these significant fiscal and human costs.**

The Commission recommends a change in direction to begin a public policy that implements best practices in the management of sex offenders and an increased focus and investment in primary

¹ Abel, G. G., Becker, J. V., Cunningham-Rathner, J., Mittleman, M. S., Murphy, M. S., & Rouleau, J. L. (1987). Self-reported crimes of nonincarcerated paraphiliacs. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2, 3–25.

² ["Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults,"](#) published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* in 1998, Volume 14, pages 245–258.

prevention. Massachusetts has developed some national models for prevention that explores both preventing victimization and perpetration of sexual violence, some examples of which are more fully described in the Massachusetts Sexual Violence Prevention Plan created by a coalition of organizations throughout the Commonwealth. While the Commission does not endorse any of these models in particular, they serve as examples of primary prevention-focused programs.

One of the most notable challenges to primary prevention is the lack of sustainable funding. To make significant progress towards preventing sexual violence, the Commission recommends a comprehensive approach sustained over time that emphasizes primary prevention as the best investment and the best opportunity for public safety.